

The Boundaries of Time

1.

BASS The salt wind brushes my bones.
The gulls cry beside my burial cave.
I send the guillemots
to ply the waves,
I count the channel's tide-race,
and trace the progress
of the high-water line.

CHORUS Rouse him in the firelight
rouse him in the emberlight
rouse him in the darkness
of our holy places
rouse him in the cave
from where he came.
May he come to see the faces
of all his fathers who went before.

BASS We followed the rites,
we gave him
the honour due,
we laid his body
in the floor of the cave.

CHORUS Come, our mother, take his spirit,
take him from the dark cave floor,
take him.

TENOR This was his resting-place
where he could face
the plain of oak and birch and pine,
where he could see
the sway of the trees
on his hunting ground,
where he will taste
the morning dew.

CHORUS Take him to your hunting pleasures
take him where the white deer run
take him
to the face of the sun

CHORUS Come, our mother, take his hand,
take him where the white deer run,
Come, our mother, take his spirit,
take him
to the face of the sun,
sit him by your side,
take him
where the great bears roam
take him
where the white lion roars
where there is no hunger,
no pain,
no want,
take him from the cave.

BASS I have seen the old earth wane.
I have watched the old gods die.
They will not return again.
I have seen the open sea
cover the face of my hunting-plain,
I have watched
as climates
and mankind change.
No longer does he touch the tree
and feel its spirit move,
no longer does he shape the stone
and feel the earth god guide his hand.
I have seen the sea
cover the land;
I have watched mankind
leave my world behind.

2.

SOP. Come, my little one, be not afraid,
do not fear the visitor, plague.
Nature and death have walked hand-in-hand
since the rivers first ran on the face of the land.

CHORUS Deliver us, O Lord, deliver us

SOP. Come, my little one, do not cry,
I am not able to tell you why
the plague knocks on some doors
and others he passes by.

CHORUS Lord, have mercy on us

SOP. Come, my little one, have no fear,
those are only the sounds of passing you hear.
That is the sound of women crying,
those are the carts that will carry the dying.

SOP. Come, my little one, stay with me,
listen to the village pray.
Some of the righteous will die,
some sinners will walk away.

CHORUS Deliver us, O Lord,
Have mercy on us, Lord,
If we have angered You
show us what we must do.
Why, Lord, take one so young?
What can she have done
that she must die?

SOP. Come, my little one, do not cry.
Be not afraid,
but stay, my little one,
stay
with me.

3.

CHORUS We hold our hands up to the sky.
Five for portents,
five for fearing,
five for hunger
in our bellies,
five for storm,
for fire,
for flood, for snow,
the fifth for blight.

BASS Four you can read on the wind,
and the fifth steals up on you,
unaware,
on breath of air.

CHORUS The sky reeks tempest black,
presses in on us, crushes us.
The wind tears at trees,
cracks limbs,
hurls leaves across the air.

BASS Four you can read on the wind

CHORUS The flash slashes across the sky.
Night flares. Thunder crashes.
The lightning streaks down,
carves light, touches
the roof of the barn.

The snow scurries, racks the ridge.
Fingers of ice rip tips of trees.
The land is leavened, sighted white,
clasped in snow-cleft, gripped
in tremor of cold.

BASS Four you can read in the face of the sky
The fifth steals up on you
unawares.

Where is your harvest now?
Your fruit is dashed to the ground.

The hay, stacked high,
is cindered and charred.

Your cattle flail and flounder,
sucked down in the flood.

Flocks, heavy with lamb,
die in the drifts, are
frozen still-born.